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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the position of the Organization of History Teachers (OHT) regarding the development of national history standards by the National Standards Project. The OHT position suggests that the Project should recognize that standards aiming for excellence in precollege history teaching require changes in the education of teachers, the retraining of current practitioners, the rewriting of textbooks, and heightened expectations for student achievement. The OHT recognizes the inherent political volatility of fashioning a single set of history standards in the ethnically diverse culture of the United States. But the organization warns that the existing void in instructional guidance in history and the social sciences, the inequalities in educational opportunities for U.S. children, the persistent gaps in the historical knowledge of U.S. students, and the inadequacy of teacher training in history infuse the effort with a special sense of urgency. The OHT strongly recommends that themes be included in the standards that would help draw together and make connections between historical epochs as well as between vast amounts of disparate information. Suggested themes include: (1) the tension between the individual the community; (2) the ever-broadening definitions of freedom and equality; (3) the impact of money and banking on the economy; (4) war and social change; (5) the role of geography and the environment; (6) the contribution of immigration to U.S. culture; (7) regionalism in the United States life, not just North/South, but East/West, and the tension between the common culture and various regional subcultures; and (8) the central role of the Constitution in every period of U.S. history. (DK)

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RESPONSE TO THE PROPOSED UNITED STATES HISTORY STANDARDS

FROM RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH THE PRESENT

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United States History Focus Committee
The Organization of History Teachers
RESPONSE TO THE PROPOSED UNITED STATES HISTORY STANDARDS
FROM RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH THE PRESENT
APRIL, 1994

The Organization of History Teachers (OHT) Focus Group in United States History applauds the innovative work on standards for teaching our country's past from the colonial period through the present compiled by The National History Project. We commend the Project's Council, school teachers, and staff for producing a comprehensive set of content and performance standards plus alternative teaching strategies. We unanimously endorse this articulation of standards. Our comments and recommendations are offered to make this outstanding specification stronger. We encourage the National Standards Project to maintain its focus on educational reform. Also, the Project should recognize that standards aiming for excellence in precollege history teaching require changes in the education of teachers, the retraining of current practioners, the rewriting of textbooks, and heighten expectations for student achievement.

GENERAL COMMENTS

We find it alarming that our country remains the only developed country without standards directing our schools towards excellence. The National Forum for History Standards, involving a diverse range of interested groups, offers a unique opportunity to achieve consensus on national standards. We recognize the inherent political volatility of fashioning a single set of history standards in our ethnically diverse culture. However, the existing void in instructional guidance in history and the social sciences, the inequalities in educational opportunities for our children, the persistent gaps in the historical knowledge of our students, and the inadequacy of teacher training in history infuse this effort with a special sense of urgency. We endorse the Project's stated missions of preparing young people for active citizenship, satisfying work, and personal fulfillment. We recommend that the standards express a commitment to an individual's responsibility to their community as well as the usual emphasis on one's individual rights.

OHT POSITIONS ON HISTORY AND CURRICULUM PRIOR TO COLLEGE

The Organization of History Teachers was founded in 1987 to provide precollege history teachers with a voice on issues pertaining to the teaching of history and the social sciences. Our leadership is comprised exclusively of precollege history teachers.

In the area of curriculum, The Organization of History Teachers believes that the teaching of history, at all levels prior to college, should occur through dynamic narrative with emphasis on, (1) chronology and sequential order; (2) men and women as the nexus for historical forces; (3) a description of humankind's journey through time in a single coherent story; (4) total history including the story of ordinary people and everyday events; (5) the achievements of women and men deserving of praise as heroes and heroines; and (6) portrayals of the past centering on description first and analytical judgments second. Also, our curriculum efforts specify essential questions, primary concepts, prominent individuals, and significant geographic features for each historical period.

From the first days of our organization, we have advocated the obvious, that history is the core of the social studies. History not only offers basic knowledge about and skills for understanding human societies but it, also, provides an orderly plan, integrating the other social sciences into a coherent scope and sequence. We believe that standards in United States and world history should emphasize that: (1) history is our most comprehensive, integrated way of knowing about human societies; (2) history's core concepts of change and continuity best represent the full context and complexity of human experience; (3) history prepares young people for citizenship in the United States through a broader vision of the world; (4) history expands the self-knowledge needed by young people for healthy moral development; (5) history refines the habits of mind needed for academic achievement and success in the modern world; and (6) history's narrative approach uniquely conveys the human drama infusing the past, present and future.

CRITERIA FOR NATIONAL STANDARDS IN HISTORY

The Organization of History Teachers (OHT) Focus Group in United States history supports the effort to establish a minimum list of content areas in United States history which will be available to all students, regardless of location, income, or local school funding. We concur that the fifteen general criteria are appropriate for the development of standards in world and United States history. We offer the following suggestions for improving these criteria.

The third criterion needs

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rewriting to give an even stronger endorsement for the inclusion of more historical content at the elementary level. Second, the OHT Focus Group believes strongly in the importance of chronology in effective history teaching. We regret the alterations made in the fifteenth criterion since our last review of the document. We believe that the previous language reflected more appropriately the importance of western civilization for American students without denigrating the contributions to American culture by other civilizations. While we recognize the delicate negotiations that produce the new wording, we reemphasize our original suggestion that the original wording be given more prominence by moving it forward in the list. We continue to believe that younger students, those taking history prior to college, should first study their own culture to provide a foundation for understanding other cultures.

The OHT Focus Group is distressed that the importance of historical narrative did not receive any mention in the criteria, since we believe that "a story well told" is essential for capturing the historical imagination of students of all ages prior to college. Without some early statement in the Project's Standards on the importance of narrative, we anticipate that an undue emphasis on analysis or interpretation might emerge from the many suggested activities which seek to refine these skills.

MAJOR THEMES

Although we disagreed with the major themes put forward in the last version of the report, we find their complete absence from the revision a serious defect. Themes offer students a useful way of organizing and making sense of the mass of factual detail they encounter in survey courses.

We hope the Council will give serious reconsideration to including themes we suggested in our last report. Our Focus Committee suggested that we offer "real themes that would help draw together and make connections between historical epochs as well as between vast amounts of disparate information. "The group suggested: (1) the tension between the individual and the community; (2) the ever-broadening definitions of freedom and equality; (3) the impact of money and banking on the economy; (4) war and social change; (5) the role of geography and the environment; (6) the contribution of immigration to American culture; (7) regionalism in American life (not just north/south, but also east/west, as well as the tension between the common culture and various regional subcultures); and (8) the central role of the Constitution in every period of our history. Such themes could unify the presentation of United States history through reiteration.

The group noted that the lack of unifying themes was probably the result of the fact that activities were conceived for each content standard separately, and thus those working on the project might have sometimes lost sight of the larger picture. For example, concern about the tension between the community and the individual is specified in the colonial period but does not appear afterward in the content standards.

Although we disagreed with the major themes put forward in the previous version of the report, we find their complete absence from the revision a serious defect. Themes offer students a useful way of organizing and making sense of the mass of factual detail they encounter in survey courses. We hope the Council will give serious consideration to including the themes we suggest above.

If the use of current "themes" is revived, we recommend that a new category for geography be created. The five central geographic factors that one should consider when studying history are: (1) location or position on the earth's surface; (2) place or the physical, human, and observed characteristics that distinguish one setting from another; (3) relationships within places or the disadvantages and advantages that places have for human settlement, and how people have modified or adapted to natural settings; (4) movement or the relationships between and among places through the movement of people, ideas, and materials, and (5) regions or areas that display unity in terms of selected criteria such as a governmental unit, a language group, or type of landform (Source: The Association of American Geographers). We continue to believe that the Standards give insufficient attention to the interrelationship of geography and history and recommend the reexamination of the concepts recommended by The Association of American Geographers.

Such geographic and historical themes not only enable students to see connections between otherwise distinct historical eras, but also between intellectual disciplines as well. Educators talk increasingly about "integrating the curriculum" at the pre-college level. Organizing United States history around the themes we have suggested will facilitate interdisciplinary learning by indicating to teachers of other disciplines where they can make connections with what we are doing.

PERIODIZATION

We are happy to see the Council's positive response to the suggestions we made for revising the titles of Eras 1 and 7. We continue to believe that the traditional political and diplomatic periodization offered by the Standards Project should be supplemented with alternative social and cultural periodizations. The Project's existing periodization could be kept while providing the states, textbook publishers, and teachers with appropriate periodization for social history.

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARDS

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The OHT Focus Group was most impressed with the revised Historical Thinking Standards (i.e., Part III) of the present document, which have transformed what was one of the weakest sections of the previous report to a new area of strength. We are pleased to endorse this section of the report without any suggestions for revision.

PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

Once again, we were pleased to note the Council's positive response to our suggestions for distinguishing between the levels of performance expected from fifth and sixth graders on the one hand and seventh and eighth graders on the other. While this distinction appropriately reflects the significant difference in the developmental abilities of these two age groups, we remain very concerned that the performance standards for these two age-groups are overly ambitious and need to be scaled down. We hope the Council will give special weight to our words since the OHT Focus Group was one of the few organizations to include elementary teachers in its membership.

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

We reemphasis our concern about scope and sequence. By appearing to endorse a framework which teaches pre-twentieth century history in the eighth grade and the twentieth century in the eleventh, the Project Report runs the risk of depriving students of the opportunity for studying many of the most exciting and complex issues in United States history (i.e., the origins of racism, the influence of Puritanism, and the beginnings of republican thought) with the sophistication and insight which mature eleventh graders can bring to such topics. The Constitution simply cannot be studied with the same penetration and intellectual rigor by fifth, eighth and eleventh graders. For this reason, the OHT Focus Group concluded that whenever United States history is being taught students should have the opportunity to be exposed to its full chronological sweep. Only someone grossly ignorant of what goes on in a history classroom prior to college would assume that because the same years are being discussed the content must necessarily be exactly the same.

For the above reasons, the OHT Focus Group would prefer that the Project advocate a minimum of two years of United States history to be taught sometime in grades eight through twelve. Such a program could either follow Curriculum Pattern D, listed on page 53 of the original report, where the entire chronology of American history would be taught in both the eighth and eleventh grades with different themes emphasized as appropriate to the developmental skills of each age group, or the entire span of United States history could be divided into two chronological parts in grades ten and eleven. Under no circumstances, however, should school districts be allowed to plead that courses in civics or American government fulfill part of the two year requirement.

TEACHER PREPARATION

There remains considerable concern within the group that a lack of academic preparation in history among many social studies teachers nationwide may frustrate the implementation of such commendably ambitious standards. We hope the Standards Project will make a strong case to funding agencies of the need for more money for inservice training for secondary school teachers in the subjects they teach as well as more release time so that they might attend more conferences in their chosen subject area and methodology. The OHT Focus Group also notes the clear connection between small class size and "active learning." Many of the "Suggested Activities" would be impossible to carry out with thirty or forty students.

As a group, we discussed what kinds of workshops might be most effective in spreading an understanding of the new standards and concluded that the old NEH summer seminar model now seemed to be faltering. Teachers would probably respond favorably to shorter summer workshops (2 -3 weeks as opposed to 4 - 6) and other workshops close to home that could perhaps be held once a month. We stress the need for the instructors in these workshops to be drawn from <u>both</u> precollege teachers and university faculties.

Because of concern about widely different levels of academic preparation among teachers, the OHT Focus Group believes that it would probably be helpful for the Project to develop an even more specific list of themes which would help guide inexperienced teachers through many of the Suggested Activities in the Project's Report. For more experienced teachers, however, a simple compendium of the sources referred to in the report would be sufficient, since good teachers are likely to work out their own activities anyway. At the very least, a comprehensive bibliography of all the readings mentioned should occupy the report.

FORMATS OF THE REPORT

All versions of the report need to begin with a stout defense of the need to study history at the pre-college level. We should not assume that all readers of the report will accept this initial premise. One version might be limited to just the introduction and the standards themselves (without any activities.) This form would probably be most useful to state and local school boards, as well as experienced teachers. Another format might include just the standards and activities applicable for each separate grade level: K-4, 5-6, 7-8, and 9-12.

We also discussed the idea of a CD-ROM which would include not

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only all the standards and activities, but also a bibliography and the texts used in the various activities as well. As a final thought, some sort of matrix illustrating which of the various themes appear in the standards and activities for each era might be a useful graphic aid for those seeking an overview of the whole report. Given modern computer technology, a keyword index would be relatively easy to produce and would make the report much handier to use for those seeking to check coverage of a particular idea or topic.

The introductory sections which begin each era are useful as they are, but could perhaps be edited in such a way so as to stress the continuity of themes and topics between the various eras. Even the best efforts at logical periodization necessarily make arbitrary divisions in some topics. Students and teachers should always be encouraged to make connections between what they have studied previously and their present work.

The report needs to reiterate frequently the idea that several standards can be combined in a single day's activities. Each standard need not constitute a separate lesson. Also, it probably can not be repeated too often that the activities are optional, and good teachers will select among them. Otherwise the length of the report will seem overwhelming.

IMPLEMENTATION OF STANDARDS

This report is just the beginning of an ambitious program aimed at revitalizing instruction in United States history. It would be a tragic waste for these standards to lie buried on the desks of chief school officers, principals, and department heads. The Center should seek funds to help implement these standards through regional workshops, teleconferences, and newsletters. Historians can learn valuable lessons from The Joint Council on Economic Education, The Joint Council on Geographic Education, and The American Psychological Association's initiatives in precollege education. These efforts offer the following strategy for implementation: (1) draft a model curriculum; (2) form a national committee comprised of educators from every level to periodically revise the curriculum; (3) offer summer programs and inservice to train teachers to use the curriculum; (4) publish a quarterly newsletter offering new assignments; and (5) construct a national network of college and university historians to work with precollege teachers involved in curriculum revision.

COMMENTS ON THE LAST REVISION OF STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY, RECONSTRUCTION TO THE PRESENT

K - 4

Generally, we believe the K-4 activities do an excellent job of blending an increased emphasis on historical content with some of the traditional ways the social studies are taught at this level. A few members of the Committee felt that more history should be included in the specification. However the activities seem well suited to an integrated approach using a variety of disciplines in teaching a particular theme. A comprehensive bibliography of recommended books in this section would be a useful addition.

UNITED STATES HISTORY RECONSTRUCTION TO THE PRESENT

Era 6

1. Standard 1 should include explicit mention of urbanization and the improvements in transportation and communication.
2. The study of cities during this period should not be limited to boss politics, overcrowding, and poor sanitation. The positive side of urban life, especially the way in which the urban environment contributed to America's cultural development, should also be stressed.
3. We may want to remind readers that the standards do not necessarily need to be taught in the order they are listed. For instance, those wanting to stress the relation between Populism and Progressivism (which bridges Eras 6 and 7) should feel free to rearrange them in order to accommodate such an emphasis.
4. Standard 3C should include the various late nineteenth century critiques of capitalism such as socialism and anarchism. Instead of limiting itself to "third parties," the standard should discuss "political and ideological movements outside the two-party system."
5. The diversity of Native American cultures in the West (nomadic Plains Indians, the more settled tribes of the Southwest, the fishing cultures of the Pacific Northwest) should be given separate consideration in Standard 4A, just as the Eastern tribes received in Eras 1 and 2.

Era 7

1. There needs to be more emphasis on women, their social status and role in the development of Victorian manners, as well as women's reform organizations. One possible activity might stress the cooperative work done by white and black women in the campaign against lynching.
2. A bullet needs to address the limitations of Progressivism (e.g., the triumph of segregation in the South, anti-immigration laws, and voter registration.) People were using the language of reform to do non-Progressive things.
3. On page 138, the concepts of the "Big Stick," Dollar Diplomacy, and Woodrow Wilson's moral diplomacy should be combined in one bullet so they can be seen as three possible

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alternatives.

Era 8

1. Once again the socialist and communitarian alternatives seem to be slighted. They should be mentioned as a response to the worst years of the depression before going on to consideration of FDR and the New Deal.
2. Although the standards include mention of Huey Long, they should encourage consideration of other alternatives to the New Deal (Francis Townsend, Charles Coughlin) as well. As they are now written, the Standards leave students without sufficient background to understand the "conservative" aspects of the New Deal.
3. A bullet is needed on population movement during this period (blacks to the North, farmers from the Midwest to California.)
4. Some mention should be made of the transformation of American federalism: the tendency of the central government to assume more and more responsibilities. Students should be aware that the federal government might appear quite differently to its citizens east and west of the Mississippi River (e.g., federal ownership of land, grazing and mining rights).

Era 9

1. The Cold War should be the unifying concept for this era. As it is presently organized, the war in Vietnam looms too large as an independent phenomenon removed from its Cold War context.
2. If the Cold War is placed first among the standards for this era, then some of the economic and social changes (which are presently mentioned first) begin to make more sense. For example, Cold War educational initiatives and the institutionalization of "Big Science."
3. It should be emphasized that the Cold War casts its shadow over the social history and popular culture of this era as well.
4. Anticommunism in the Cold War era involves more than just one man. If the word "McCarthyism" is necessary for name-recognition value, it should be mentioned after "anticommunism" in order to make this point clear.
5. The "atomic age" and nuclear politics need more emphasis. The nature of war changed fundamentally with the advent of the atom bomb and consciousness of the possibility of nuclear destruction pervades people's thinking in this period.
6. The protest movement of the 1960s had broader goals than just opposition to the war in Vietnam. Students should be encouraged to read the Port Huron statement as an activity.

Era 10

1. Standard 3B should be rewritten to focus on the development of a "post-industrial," service economy and the advent of the "information age." By doing this, the issues surrounding immigration then makes more sense as a response to these economic changes.
2. Students should be invited to compare whether present immigrants are more or less "loyal" to their "home" cultures than immigrants were in earlier eras in United States history.
3. Rather than creating a separate standard around the rise of evangelicalism in recent years, students should be encouraged to consider why the United States is the most "church-going" of industrialized nations and to examine the roots of this phenomenon in our past.
4. Standard 2C needs to use more precise language in distinguishing between "fundamentalist" and "pentecostal" movements, rather than lumping both together under the label "fundamentalism."
5. Standard 2B seems overly generous in the credit it gives Presidents Reagan and Bush for ending the Cold War.
6. This era provides excellent opportunities for activities in oral and local history which seem underexploited by some of the suggested activities now included.

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